the drinks business

NEWS

Mr Yquem: How Leonid Shutov got Londoners sipping Sauternes

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By Lucy Shaw

After an hour on the phone with Leonid Shutov, the immaculately attired Russian restaurateur behind diner deluxe Bob Bob Ricard, I'm reminded of the Oscar Wilde quip: "I'm a man of simple tastes. I'm always satisfied with the best."

Prior to moving to London in 2007 with the aim of opening a venue that transported diners back to the golden age of train travel, Shutov led a Don Draper-like existence as the head of a successful advertising agency in Moscow. He settled on London as the place to turn his restaurant dream into a reality due to it being "the most cosmopolitan city on earth", and, perhaps more importantly, a place where he and his family felt at home.

Having spent years satisfying the whims of demanding clients during his Don Draper days, Shutov was hungry to move away from the corporate world and do something customer focused, and the immediacy of the restaurant industry appealed. Securing a prime central London site on Upper James Street in Soho, Shutov had one man in his sights that he knew was capable of turning his whimsical vision into a velvet-swagged reality: interiors maestro David Collins, who previously prettified Corbin and King's The Wolseley on Piccadilly.

Bob Bob Ricard's lavish interiors evoke an Edwardian Orient Express carriage, from the plush midnight blue booths complete with velvet curtains, which allow for intimacy amidst the buzz, to the smoked mirrors and brass railings running from booth to ceiling.

"I decided on the booths as I wanted to give diners a sense of privacy and the feeling of being cocooned in luxury," says Shutov. Table tops are marble, and feature a golden 'Press for Champagne' button, which has been exhaustively replicated by restaurants and bars keen to tap into the Bob Bob magic.

Cubist chandeliers hang from a Venetian-mirrored ceiling, while the walls are festooned with ancestral portraits, the subjects of which gaze haughtily into the distance. Throwing gender stereotypes out the train window, when the restaurant launched in 2008, the waiters wore pale pink jackets and ties while waitresses sported turquoise waistcoats.

"I wanted to do something different that had never been done before, and it was a huge luxury to be able to work with David Collins on the design. When I met with him it felt like a mixture between going for my first job interview and meeting the in-laws," Shutov reveals. "I felt I had to prove that my intentions were honourable."

Admitting to having "mild OCD", Shutov's design journey didn't end when the restaurant opened. In a short space of time he changed the colour scheme three times, from gold, to flamingo pink, to pink and grey candy striped, eventually settling on the blue hues that have remained in place ever since. The wallpaper, featuring a crane motif, isn't in fact wallpaper, but Japanese book biding paper that comes in tiny sheets that Shutov has specially made for the site.

As for the name, Shutov says he didn't want to choose something too French, or a name that sounded like it had been made up in an ad agency. He settled on Bob Bob Ricard as 'Bob' was the nickname given to him by his English business partner Richard, who he used to call 'Ricard'. At the time Shutov had the larger share of the business, so his name got to appear twice above the door. He is now the sole owner.

As for the famous ‘Press for Champagne’ button, Shutov says it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy, but that having it has certainly helped to boost fizz sales – the venue sells over 115,000 glasses of Champagne a year. “Bob Bob Ricard is a place where you want to celebrate and drink Champagne. The button is the essence of what the restaurant is. We don’t sell a lot of Champagne because we have the button, we sell a lot of Champagne *and* we have the button,” he says.

There are currently eight Champagnes on offer by the glass taking in a number of different styles, from Taittinger Brut Réserve at £14, and Bollinger Special Cuvée at £15.50, to Dom Pérignon 2010 at £24 a glass. Shutov’s love of wine began with a love of Champagne, and over the years he’s built up strong personal relationships with the houses he works with.

“Champagne has always been my great love – Bordeaux and Burgundy came afterwards. There’s something very special about it. Just pouring it into a glass makes you excited. For many years Champagne was the only wine I would drink. On our menu there’s a Champagne for every course.”

Shutov advocates drinking Champagne throughout a meal rather than relegating it to the role of apéritif. “Champagne is a very versatile wine and can work fantastically well throughout a meal. I think the idea that you can only drink Champagne at the beginning of a meal is changing. We list the likes of Krug 1988, which is rich, evolved and complex, and can stand up to a lot of dishes.”

Largely sticking to the grandes marques, Shutov also lists Egly Ouriet Les Crayeres Blanc de Blancs in a hat tip to grower Champagnes. Passionate about making it worthwhile for diners to trade up to a better bottle of wine, since the restaurant opened in 2008, it has only ever added a small mark-up to its listings.

“Too often you go out for incredible food that you could never cook at home, and you end up drinking a wine you might drink at home at a fairly substantial cost because the mark-ups at a lot of restaurants are prohibitively expensive.

“I want the wine at Bob Bob Ricard to be as memorable as the food, as it’s an inseparable part of the dining experience,” says Shutov, who says a number of his wines are listed at cheaper prices than you’ll find at retail. “We never mark up the wines by more than £60 on our own cost of the bottle. We’re savvy buyers and have great relationships with our suppliers, which makes it possible” he says.

If his first love is Champagne, then Yquem is his mistress. Shutov has been offering the sweet elixir by the glass from the get-go. The 1996 and 2001 vintages are currently available by the bottle, while the 1998 is on pour by the 75ml glass at £29.

“We make the same amount on our Yquem by the glass as we would on a glass of house sweet wine, as the cash margin is so tiny, but it makes a huge difference to the customers, many of whom are trying for it the first time, which really adds to their experience,” says Shutov, who seems aware that as a restaurateur he is essentially in the entertainment business.

“It’s such a rare and special wine, a lot of people go for it as it’s on pour by the glass, which makes it affordable.” The offer has proved such a hit that Shutov reports to selling 1% of Yquem’s total production of the 1998 vintage at the restaurant alone; a feat even he’s staggered by.

In addition to turning London into a city of Champagne and Sauternes sippers, he’s also on a mission to get Brits’ to enjoy vodka the Russian way – spine-chillingly cold and with food. “The only way to drink vodka is with food,” he says.

The Russian Standard vodka on pour at the restaurant is served at -18 degrees in tiny cut crystal glasses. While vodka producers have worked hard in recent years to flag up the fact that there is more to the spirit than its neutral stereotype implies, according to Shutov, the purpose vodka serves during a meal is as a palate cleanser rather than a characterful drink.

“In the west spirits are expected to have a lot of flavour, but a fine Russian vodka is heavily distilled to an incredible purity. Everything other than the alcohol taste is removed and the connection to the wheat is just a delicate hint of breadiness. It’s like smelling spring water it’s so ephemeral.

“Unlike wine, when you drink vodka with food, the flavours don’t merge into something new – instead, the vodka helps to amplify the flavours in the dish,” says Shutov, who must be doing something right as Bob Bob shifts over 50,000 shots of vodka a year.

While his Soho original is doing a good job of weathering the Covid storm, buoyed by the support of loyal regulars, Shutov’s sister site, Bob Bob Cité, remains shuttered. Having opened last summer after 16 months of delays on the third floor of the Leadenhall Building in London’s financial heart, the £25m project, inspired by the golden age of aviation and boasting a cellar heaving with imperials of Margaux, Mouton and Latour, has been closed since March.

“The restaurant has been open for less time than it has been closed, which is deeply disappointing and depressing for a project of that scale and cost,” laments Shutov, who used the first lockdown as an opportunity to give the basement dining room in his Soho site a make-over, changing the spacing of the booths to make them “Covid compliant”.

While the challenges ahead are numerous, Shutov is adamant that he will never dilute the decadence on offer at Bob Bob Ricard with pared-down menus, as it goes against everything he stands for.

“Next year will be difficult, as we’ll be carrying a year’s worth of losses with us that we haven’t been able to make up yet. There will be a lot of wounds that need healing, which will stretch a lot of the industry beyond breaking point.

“Our job is to make sure our customers don’t see that pain, because they come to us to celebrate, and I want to deliver everything that they’ve come to expect from us,” says Shutov, who runs restaurants the same way as he drinks Champagne – with no half measures.

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